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Disintegrating labour relations and depoliticised adaptation to climate change in rural São Tomé and Príncipe

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That climate change is a major disruptor of rural livelihoods in the low- and middle-income countries, including sub-Saharan Africa, has been a key narrative for the continent's development for at least a decade. And while the severity of climate impacts on African development should not be underestimated, in this paper I argue that the vulnerability of smallholders in São Tomé and Príncipe should be considered in the broader political economic and historical context of progressing depeasantisation and proletarianisation of global agricultural labour. Moreover, I posit that certain smallholders' vulnerability can actually increase as a result of both autonomous and externally planned adaptation strategies, the latter most commonly promoted by governments and their international development partners. To substantiate these arguments, the paper combines theoretical insights from labour geography and critical adaptation studies with ethnographic data collected in Liberdade – a village in the small island nation of São Tomé and Príncipe – which participated in a nationwide climate change adaptation project. I trace local smallholders' vulnerability back to the country's political economic history and complement this by an investigation of the changing labour relations at the community level. Here, I analyse the autonomous adaptation strategies pursued by the residents and critically assess the localised effects of planned adaptation embodied by the project, with a specific focus on how they affect local labour relations. I conclude by providing some reflections on addressing the current pitfalls of planned adaptation.

KEYWORDS
adaptation, Africa, climate change, labour geography, proletarianisation, vulnerability

1 | INTRODUCTION: IT'S NOT (JUST) ABOUT CLIMATE CHANGE

The contemporary development doctrine followed by large donors (e.g. World Bank, United Nations, Western aid agencies) identifies climate change as one of the main causes of socio-economic vulnerability in sub-Saharan Africa (see World Bank, 2013, 2015). And while the effects of climate change on the continent's agricultural production will certainly be significant and potentially disastrous (see, for instance, FAO, 2018), in this paper I challenge the depoliticised development orthodoxy which tends to analytically foreground the climate at the cost of political-economic forces and social inequity (Mikulewicz & Taylor, 2020). Specifically, I posit that the origin of the region's vulnerability lies in neoliberal thinking

transplanted into discussions and practices specific to adaptation to climate change. In combining insights from labour geography and critical adaptation studies, my aim is to address the "conspicuous silence" of labour geographers on the issue of climate change (Parsons and Natarajan, this issue), particularly when it comes to local-level analyses (Lenschow et al., 2016).

I make two major claims here. First, I argue that the vulnerability of smallholders in São Tomé and Príncipe (STP) should be considered in the broader political economic and historical context of progressing depeasantisation and proletarianisation of global agricultural labour. While STP's case is rather unique – it is the only country where the state sought to *create* rurality itself (Seibert, 2006) and did so relatively late over a very short period of time[1] – its rural development trajectory is largely generalisable to sub-Saharan Africa. Second, using the village of Liberdade[2] as a case study, I illustrate how both autonomous and planned adaptation strategies can in fact exacerbate local residents' vulnerability and the precariousness of their livelihoods.

In the next section, I provide a brief theoretical overview of the evolution of rural labour relations in sub-Saharan Africa and discuss how these articulate with both kinds of adaptation. Following a brief methodology section, the argument shifts to the main findings, including an analysis of the agricultural development history of STP and the autonomous and planned adaptation strategies in Liberdade. The paper concludes by providing some reflections on addressing the current pitfalls of planned adaptation, in particular.

2 | RURAL LABOUR RELATIONS AND ADAPTATION TO CLIMATE CHANGE

2.1 | Proletarianisation, livelihood fragmentation, and rural stratification

Following peasantisation (or rural class formation) actively pursued by colonial and post-colonial governments throughout much of the 20th century, the new millennium has been marked by progressing *de*peasantisation, or "a specific form of deagrarianization in which peasantries lose their economic capacity and social coherence, and shrink in demographic size relative to nonpeasant populations" (Bryceson, 2002, p. 727; Havnevik et al., 2007). Statistical data confirms this, suggesting that the share of agricultural employment in sub-Saharan Africa has shrunk from almost 63% to just under 55% between 1992 and 2018 (World Bank, 2019b).

One of the main causes of depeasantisation is rural proletarianisation, or stripping the agricultural producer of their means of production (e.g., land; Araghi, 2009; Misra, 2017). This occurs in two possible ways. First, it proceeds via accumulation by dispossession, where capitalist expansion into the countryside dispossesses the rural class, turning smallholders into waged labourers (Harvey, 2003). Second, proletarianisation can also stem from local inequalities, whereby wealthy farmers secure land from their neighbours struggling to maintain a stable production and thus income. The ultimate result of both processes is that poorer farmers, ill-equipped to participate in the agricultural "modernisation" project, resort to selling or renting out their plots to their neighbours or outsiders. However, this proletarianisation is not always absolute or complete, as in many cases African smallholders tend to preserve a small portion of land for subsistence farming as a safety net and exist alongside capitalism as semi-dispossessed producers (Araghi, 2009).

Frequently, the gradual erosion of agricultural livelihoods is not compensated by commensurate wages or business income. Instead, households engage in experimentation with a large number of small-scale productive activities, often in multiple sectors and in a highly ad hoc manner, ultimately leading to the fragmentation of labour and precarisation of livelihoods (Bryceson, 2002; Havnevik et al., 2007). It should be noted that fragmentation of labour is not interpreted here as tantamount to livelihood diversification; the former implies precariousness (largely due to its ephemeral nature), while the latter does not. Fragmented labour, therefore, can lead to livelihoods that are more tenuous and vulnerable to shocks. Unsurprisingly, one of the major consequences of these changing relations of labour in rural Africa has been social stratification. As Bernstein astutely noted, "for each farming household able to establish and reproduce itself as capital and to secure labour …, there are others 'too poor to farm' or to farm as the principal basis of any minimally adequate livelihood" (2006, p. 404). This reflects the findings of limited quantitative analyses of this process, which suggest that rural growth is rarely inclusive (Andersson Djurfeldt, 2013).

2.2 | Autonomous and planned adaptation

It should not be denied that climate change can act as a powerful driver for rural stratification and livelihood fragmentation, especially since people's experiences of climate change impacts are highly heterogeneous. Moreover, autonomous adaptation strategies taken by individuals can themselves be highly stratifying, leading to local winners and losers (Brown, 2016).

Yet, it is arguably the inequitable nature of agricultural development of the last few decades that has largely contributed to local vulnerabilities (Bryceson, 2002), having produced extremely precarious livelihoods for marginal farmers on the one hand, and secure ones for capitalist farmers, on the other. Understood in this way, climate change impacts merely expose and exacerbate pre-existing vulnerabilities, rather causing them per se (Taylor, 2014). What follows from this is that local inequalities breed particularly high vulnerability to climate change impacts for certain groups, households, and individuals.

While the fact that autonomous adaptation is a stratifying process is hardly surprising, planned adaptation in the form of policies, programmes, and projects can paradoxically play a similar role. It has been widely noted that institutional responses to climate change, including adaptation, are aggressively depoliticised (Eriksen et al., 2015; Mikulewicz, 2018, 2019; Nightingale, 2015; Swyngedouw, 2011; Taylor, 2014). This is not a contingent issue and, in the case of adaptation in low- and middle-income countries, stems from its intrinsic relationship with development and neoliberalism. Adaptation nowadays forms part and parcel of the neoliberal development thinking and practice (e.g., see UNDP, 2014b; World Bank, 2016), which sees economic growth as key for increasing societal resilience (Mikulewicz, 2019; Mikulewicz & Taylor, 2020). The resulting techno-managerial prescriptions (e.g., livelihood diversification, adopting green technologies) not only fail to address local adaptation challenges by missing the root causes of vulnerability, but work as a socially stratifying capitalist fix providing new avenues for accumulation and market penetration by external actors and local elites (Eriksen et al., 2015; Magnan et al., 2016; Taylor, 2014).

Two key adaptation strategies preferred by development agents operating in rural Africa should be highlighted here. Increasing agricultural productivity via a range of technical, technological, and institutional measures is frequently offered to more "successful" farmers (Cavanagh et al., 2017; Taylor, 2018). This most often applies to, following Bernstein (2010), capitalist rural producers who already deliver sizeable yields. Others are to pursue livelihood diversification, seen as one of the most promising climate change adaptation strategies given the broadly recognised poor state of the African agricultural sector (Brown, 2016; World Bank, 2015). However, while a theoretically reasonable policy goal, it has been pointed out that this is not a straightforward process and does not always benefit the household (Alobo Loison, 2015), at times replicating the process of labour fragmentation and the resulting precarisation of livelihoods.

3 | METHODOLOGY: MULTI-SITED, INSTITUTIONAL QUASI-ETHNOGRAPHY

The data underpinning this paper was collected as part of the author's doctoral fieldwork in late 2015 and early 2016. The adopted methodological approach can be described as a multi-sited, institutional quasi-ethnography. Fieldwork was carried out in multiple sites: the regional office of a large development organisation in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia (October 2015 to January 2016), its country office in STP's capital and the village of Liberdade in the Lobata District, home to around 160 families (February to May 2016). In the case of the latter, fieldwork involved visits to Liberdade spanning from two to six hours, between three and five times a week from March to May 2016. A local gatekeeper provided ample information on the village and facilitated access to key individuals. The initial fieldwork in 2015/2016 was supplemented by two half-day visits to Liberdade in March 2019 (as part of a research trip for another project), which included informal follow-up conversations with key participants. As an institutional ethnography, this research sought to uncover the social institutions – both at the level of organisations involved in the adaptation project and within the community itself – that govern local beliefs, behaviours, and actions, and specifically how they culminate in processes of subjugation and subordination (Billo & Mountz, 2016). However, due to the limited time available for work in the field, language barriers both at the country office and the community itself, and various issues of access, this research should be considered a quasi-ethnography rather than a "fully-fledged" ethnography (Reed, 2006).

Data was collected through participant observation, 56 semi-structured interviews with development practitioners in Ethiopia and STP (including those working for the adaptation project) and community members (10 with men and women each), informal conversations, transect walks, and participatory mapping in Liberdade. Interviews were conducted in English, Portuguese, Creole Portuguese, French, and Italian, and interpreted by project staff members when necessary. Intelligent verbatim transcription was carried out using Express Scribe Pro software. Primary data was supplemented by a range of secondary sources (project and government reports, grey literature, demographic data). Transcribed data was uploaded to NVivo Pro data analysis software (NVivo Pro Qualitative Data Analysis Software, 2015) and, along with field notes and secondary sources, analysed using an applied thematic analysis approach (Boyatzis, 1998; Guest et al., 2012).

4 | FROM SLAVES TO SMALLHOLDERS TO DISPOSSESSED LABOURERS

STP is a small island developing state (SIDS) located in the Gulf of Guinea, with a population of approximately 210,000 (World Bank, 2019a). It is classified by the UN as a least developed country, with over 90% of public spending financed by foreign aid. STP faces major development challenges related to poverty, public health, education, and a poorly diversified economy (UNDP, 2014a) and is highly vulnerable to droughts, flash floods, storm surges, and sea-level rise (INDC, 2015). Any discussion of these climate impacts on labour relations in rural STP must consider Africa's agricultural development history, which has always been shaped by global political economic processes (Araghi, 2009; Bernstein, 2006; Mcmichael, 2008). In the case of STP's plantation-based economy, four key historical periods can be identified: slave labour (1492–1885), indentured labour (1885–1975), state paid labour (1975–1990), and smallholder agriculture (1990 onwards).

In the early 1500s, the Portuguese brought the first slaves to the uninhabited archipelago from continental Africa to work on sugarcane *roças* (plantations), making the islands the first European cash crop colony. Faced with an acute worker shortage following the abolition of slavery in 1875–1876, the colonial administration introduced an indentured labour system with workers (*serviçais*) recruited from elsewhere in Africa (Seibert, 2006). At independence in 1975, the socialist regime supported by the USSR promptly nationalised the plantations to form the backbone of the new nation's undiversified economy and to prevent local concentrations of wealth (Seibert, 2006). Almost overnight, indentured workers now became employees of state agricultural enterprises.

In 1987, given the growing inefficiency and unprofitability of the plantations caused by a range of micro- and macroeconomic factors, STP agreed to an IMF-orchestrated Structural Adjustment Program to diversify the economy, increase exports, and repay the national debt (Seibert, 2006). However, these measures failed to revitalise the economy, eventually leading to the most profound socio-economic transformation in recent Santomean history – the privatisation of agriculture and the associated redistribution of agricultural land to the rural population (Seibert, 2006). As much as 75 percent of available land previously owned by the *roças* was to be partitioned into plots not exceeding ten hectares each and distributed to what would constitute a rural small-holding class. The land reform was transformative in the sense that it granted labourers and their descendants de facto hereditary rights to land,[3] which until then they had cultivated as salaried employees, indentured workers, or slaves (Seibert, 2006). However, a range of environmental, social, and political-economic pressures and processes have prevented the new smallholding class from increasing agricultural productivity and reviving the country's crippling primary sector (Seibert, 2006).

The creation of the rural class was part of the broader neoliberalisation of the Santomean economy, which also left the workers-turned-smallholders with minimal state support – an issue which continues until this day. This has led to a progressing fragmentation of livelihoods, with many farmers unable to derive sufficient income exclusively based on agricultural production. And while the impacts of colonialism on STP's (and most of Africa's) development trajectory is critical, the current political and socio-economic circumstances of many rural Santomeans appear to be directly related to neoliberalisation.

In Liberdade, the ensuing social stratification manifests itself through the progressing consolidation of land holdings, with the number of absentee land owners with disproportionately large plots estimated at around 20 by the gatekeeper. Moreover, at the time of fieldwork, the plots of Liberdade's then-president and ex-vice-president (members of the village elite) were multiple times larger than those belonging to other residents. Therefore, Liberdade is witnessing two interrelated processes of proletarianisation: one stemming from internal differentiation at the local level that benefits the local elite, and the other carried out from the outside by wealthy city-based landowners.

A process running in parallel to this consolidation of land assets in Liberdade has been the creation of a group of predominantly young landless people who report having difficulties securing their own provisional titles from the state, not infrequently despite their determination to maintain agricultural livelihoods. Barring a transfer from a family member, this leaves a number of local residents with no land, and so informal use is very common. This insecure land access which depends on the goodwill of family members or neighbours adds to the precariousness of many local livelihoods. Moreover, landlessness creates a vicious cycle of growing financial dependence of the rural labour class on landowners, which many scholars concerned with issues of land access have noted in other geographical and cultural contexts (Taylor, 2014). Importantly, social stratification of this kind is made more pronounced not just by the gravity of local climate change impacts, but also by autonomous and planned adaptation strategies pursued locally.

5 | CLIMATE CHANGE AND ADAPTATION IN LIBERDADE

5.1 | Local autonomous adaptation strategies

Farming remains the primary occupation of most Liberdade residents, with plots in the village averaging 1.5 ha (with the notable exception of the local elite and some absentee owners). Liberdade is known as a major producer of maize and sugarcane. In terms of climate change impacts, decreasing precipitation over the last few years has been noticed by the majority of residents – an observation corroborated by government sources (NAPA, 2006) – with the area currently undergoing savannisation. As irrigation channels in and around the village - a vestige of Portuguese colonial efficiency - have fallen into disrepair over the last three decades, it comes as no surprise that many fields are abandoned during dry spells. Maize producers, in particular, are hit hard by droughts, one of the most recent of which occurred in 2015 and cost local growers an entire harvest.

The residents of Liberdade are autonomously adapting to the impacts of droughts in two major ways. First, some adjust their crop choices to more lucrative crops, such as lima beans, tomatoes, chili peppers, cassava, and sweet potato. Crop diversification, however, is a relatively limited practice due to the lack of sufficient extension services, the need to irrigate such crops, and the high prices of new seed varieties, pesticides, and fertilisers. Second, most of the interviewed smallholders have secondary or even tertiary occupations to supplement farm-derived income. In general, livelihoods in Liberdade are increasingly fragmented and constitute an amalgamation of different minor and low-paid occupations. This includes running small businesses (shops), subsistence fishing, and animal husbandry, and in limited cases migration to the city or to Cabo Verde, with which residents have a close cultural affinity. A key coping strategy, however, is selling labour, including domestic help services in the case of women and agricultural labour, either in Liberdade or in the neighbouring communities, in the case of men. A notable example of just how fragmented some livelihoods in Liberdade have become is one of the research participants. A single mother of six (her husband died of malaria in 2013), she has an unirrigated field where she cultivates maize, sugarcane, and manioc. She also sells beer, wine, and homemade food to her neighbours, produces *aguardente* (see below), works as a small trader buying and selling goods in different locations, raises chickens and guinea pigs for consumption, occasionally does laundry for her neighbours, and works as a labourer in their (usually) irrigated fields.

5.1.1 | *Aguardente*: Liberdade's autonomous adaptation strategy

At the intersection of crop and livelihood diversification is the production of *aguardente* – a sugarcane-based alcoholic drink of gin-like quality, the production of which a growing number of residents, particularly women and the youth, have started to pursue as an alternative livelihood due to sugarcane's higher resistance to drought compared to maize. Moreover, despite a relatively short growth cycle of between 90 and 120 days, maize should be sold promptly after the harvest even if prices are low (due to little local capacity for storage), while sugarcane delivers a more stable yield spread throughout the year, thus enabling consumption smoothing.

However, the status of *aguardente* production as a viable local adaptation strategy is complicated by multiple challenges faced by local producers, including dwindling sales (potentially caused by increased competition), the need to acquire sugarcane stalks from the few farmers whose fields are in close proximity to water (a condition required for growing the crop), high prices of granulated sugar from the local store (a key ingredient in the production process), and having to pay fees to use the sugarcane presses in the village owned by townsfolk and, not infrequently, to store the sugar liquid in other residents' casks. Moreover, most producers rely on city-based vendors who sell their *aguardente* on consignment (paying the producer only after goods have been sold).

Having to rely on intermediaries places additional burden on local distillers, who are left with no profit if *aguardente* does not sell or is simply appropriated by vendors (which reportedly happens on a regular basis, especially in the case of women). Thus, pursuing *aguardente* production as an adaptation strategy ends up exacerbating local residents' dependence on the elites and traders and negatively affects the social fabric in general (local alcohol consumption is on the rise), contributing to rebounding vulnerability, a type of maladaptation identified by Juhola et al. (2016).

5.2 | Planned adaptation as a stratifying force in Liberdade

In line with the key adaptation strategies outlined in Section 2, the project led by the government in partnership with a major development organisation seeks to increase rural livelihoods' resilience (itself a highly contentious and contested

term; see Mikulewicz, 2019; Mikulewicz & Taylor, 2020) in two major ways. First, increased productivity is to be achieved through agricultural modernisation, aimed at boosting the income of those whose livelihoods rely directly on natural resources. However, critical scholarship stresses that by focusing on technological, institutional, and market-based measures to increase productivity, development actors frequently dis-embed agricultural production from local socio-political contexts, which are in turn defined by land tenure regimes and inequitable processes of production and consumption (Mikulewicz & Taylor, 2020; Taylor, 2014). This approach foregrounds the role of adaptation managers and experts who may prescribe solar freezers, greenhouses, increased use of agricultural inputs, and farmer training sessions (all within the scope of the project) as key for preparing local communities for the impacts of climate change.

As of March 2019, the project constructed a greenhouse in Liberdade and created an association of greenhouse growers. During the follow-up visit, the gatekeeper indicated that out of the eight individuals who make up the association, three were absentee owners residing in the city and one is a relatively wealthy resident with local and international connections. While everyone was officially invited and welcome to participate in the project consultation meetings, these participation rituals did not translate into any kind of material benefits for the most vulnerable. While the exact process for selecting the greenhouse association members is unclear, it is understandable why these particular individuals were approved by the project. Initiatives centred on increasing agricultural productivity rarely engage the poorest and least productive farmers (ignoring the landless altogether), and instead focus on the residents most likely to deliver reportable increases in yields. This is crucial from the project monitoring and evaluation perspective, but inevitably results in sidelining the social groups who arguably need adaptation support the most. Meanwhile, many Liberdade residents, particularly women, were de facto excluded from major consultations (as agriculture is seen as a predominantly male domain). Similarly, the president of the community was reported to cherry-pick attendees for the few project consultation meetings that did take place.

To a certain extent, however, the project recognises that increasing agricultural productivity may not be a feasible option for all residents. Here, the already mentioned strategy of livelihood diversification aims to address the "mismatch" between the market and unemployed or underemployed people's skillsets. The goal is to steer the non-productive farmers (those who do not own sufficient land, lack farming skills, or cannot afford sufficient inputs) to reinvent their livelihoods away from agriculture and towards activities that could supplement or even replace farming as a major source of income. And while running one's own business, most typically in the service sector as a small trader, is pushed by governments and development agents as a key non-agricultural livelihood diversification strategy, ex-farmers frequently struggle to run a financially sustainable business. In those instances, they resort to selling cheap, unskilled labour in the agricultural, industrial, or service sectors. In Liberdade, this creates social externalities in the form of growing dependency on successful farmers and entrepreneurs, which goes largely unrecognised and unaddressed by the project or the national government.

The dominant approach to planned adaptation espoused by the development sector thus sees two pathways for climate-affected farmers in STP: increasing production or diversifying their livelihoods. In the former case, farmers are to move away from subsistence agriculture and towards commercialisation and market integration by simultaneously becoming consumers of agricultural inputs and more efficient producers of agricultural goods. In the latter case, they are expected to "graduate" from natural-resource-based livelihoods and enter either the capitalist class of small entrepreneurs or skilled labour. For example, while not implemented in Liberdade, the project document envisaged training participants in arts and crafts or value-adding agricultural product processing.

6 | CONCLUSION

The case of Liberdade demonstrates that smallholders' vulnerability to climate change impacts stems from both past and current agricultural development processes, which are highly uneven. While the most precarious farmers are already struggling to socially reproduce themselves, planned adaptation offers them very little in terms of political, social, and economic redistribution necessary to even out the playing field in the Santomean countryside. On the contrary, the externally prescribed solutions to adaptation are bound to compound the exploitative social relations described above.

On the one hand, the neoliberalising political economic forces, which expose semi-dispossessed producers with no tangible state support to highly competitive markets, push them onto the fringes of capitalism. On the other, those who seek refuge from the vagaries of the markets and the climate in different professions – for example, by choosing the path of producing *aguardente* or selling agricultural labour – continue to find themselves at a material and political disadvantage relative to more powerful groups and individuals, whether in the city or their own village. Given the very short, decade-or-so-long period of peasantisation and the low levels of social cohesion stemming from the country's troubled history of slave and indentured labour, the social unravelling of the smallholder class in STP is likely to accelerate in the future – and perhaps more so than in other African countries (see Bryceson, 2015).

The above considerations point to a key question: How could adaptation be reimagined in a way to equalise rather than exacerbate the dominant relations of labour in the African countryside? While depeasantisation may not be a negative trend in itself, its consequences certainly can be, as demonstrated by the case of smallholders in Liberdade. The research findings outlined above confirm the widely held view among critical scholars that adaptation managers' quest for increased agricultural productivity and economic diversification – both goals that sound perfectly reasonable in theory – tend to result in producing winners and losers in practice.

Based on Liberdade's experience with autonomous and planned adaptation, it becomes clear that the "losers" should receive priority from the state and its external partners when designing and carrying out local responses to climate change impacts. Evidence shows little support for the still popular "trickle-down" development heuristic, whereby the newly found wealth of some farmers will be shared – directly or indirectly – with the poorest and marginalised community members. Without a major rethinking of development and adaptation assistance in line with the broadly understood principles of social or climate justice, the views and needs of agricultural labourers, the landless, and those living on the fringes of capitalism will continue to be cast aside, silenced, and forgotten. Depoliticised adaptation or "adaptation-as-usual", which fails to recognise or address the exploitative labour relations that frequently lead to maladaptation in rural Africa, is simply inadequate for the task.

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DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

Research data are not shared.

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ENDNOTES

[1] State-led peasantisation lasted for most of the 1990s and concluded in the early 2000s (Seibert, 2006).
[2] The name of the village has been altered to preserve residents' anonymity.
[3] All plots in STP are used on a usufruct basis – concessionaries lease them under renewable, 20-year provisional titles (*títulos provisórios*), with a rarely enforced clause allowing the state to revoke the concession if the land is not considered properly cultivated (Seibert, 2006).

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